Reinventing the Ummah? The Trans-Locality of Pan-Islam

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Muslim societies, like all others, are inexorably being pulled in the direction of globalisation: economic interdependence, cultural exchanges, intimate political interactions. On one level, there is nothing new about such interrelationships in the case of Islam, and indeed it may be argued that 'Islam' is naturally translocal and cosmopolitan. The bedrock tenet of belief, *tawhid* (oneness), endorses the ultimate goal of one community of faith (*umma*); the *hajj* is the great convocation of Muslims, indistinguishable in principle by national or sectarian identity; early and medieval Islamic history is replete with examples of networks of traders who significantly helped to advance the word of Islam; travelling elites such as students, scholars, judges, and political officials routinely sought knowledge (*rihla*) far from their home societies or went on minor pilgrimages (*ziyarat*); Sufi orders rapidly spread from their spiritual centres and created expansive 'brotherhoods'; and the Ottoman empire constituted a multi-ethnic, far flung political organisation.

But today a new political geography may be emerging: (a) once primarily focused on relatively fixed physical frontiers and the control of territories, geopolitics now increasingly involves mobile groups and social movements with competing claims and counterclaims; (b) deterritorialisation, to some extent, has taken place, with large-scale migration long underway, and new emphases on race and ethnicity as markers of identity; and (c) concepts of space and distance have been redefined: connections and disconnections, distance and proximity are notional. Through television and the Internet, images of political and religious authority as well as community are daily projected into domestic space; and 'virtual Islam' takes Muslims into some ethereal neighbourhood that understates physical, even perhaps cultural, distances. (It is, however, another matter whether such a changing political geography creates new space for opposition and protest.)

Emergence of 'pan-Islam' as idea and symbol

Pan-Islam has its roots in the familiar double assault of imperialism and decentralisation on the Ottomans in the late nineteenth century. It was certainly the case that a broad Islamic sentiment—a pan-Islamic populism of sorts—had begun to emerge from the 1870s in South and Southeast Asia and other parts of the Muslim world. The advent of a local press played an important role in stimulating, and giving expression to, this larger concern, at least among the educated classes: "The more Indian Muslims discovered about the fate of their brethren elsewhere in the Islamic world, the more they wished to know".

The sultan, Abdulhamid (1842-1918), polemicists such as Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838-97), and Western apologists such as Wilfred Blunt were self-interested advocates of a pan-Islamic ideology. But these proponents helped to make a vague idea of unity a symbol of the modern Islamic condition at the same time as they used it to advance partisan political interests. Ethnic, national, and Islamic ideas intermingled in the discord of the early twentieth century. The Young Turks hoped to use a vaguely defined Islam policy to offset imperial losses, such as occurred with Libya, and to rally broad Muslim support. The Treaty of Lausanne (1912) ratified Italian sovereignty over Libya, for instance, but the Turkish sultan was also formally recognised as caliph and provision was made for his name to be mentioned in the Friday sermon (*khutba*) and for the imperial administration to appoint Libya's chief judge (*qadi*). This drama of a generally ailing empire was closely followed and reported on in local newspapers such as Abul Kalam Azad's *al-Hilal* and Zafar Ali Khan's *Zamindar* in South Asia.

The Turkish Grand National Assembly directly challenged believers and non-believers alike when, in March 1924, it abolished the caliphate, but the consequences were different from what had been anticipated. Kemalists, for their part, assumed it would inevitably lead to the secularisation of Muslim societies; devout followers believed it would further weaken Muslims in their interaction with the West; colonial offices feared that it would stimulate a broad uprising of the world-wide Muslim community. None occurred, but the lingering appeal of Muslim solidarity was significant and assumed its place, ironically, in the formation of modern Muslim states and, more recently, in attempts to undermine them.

Different perspectives emerged between 1923 and 1926. Conservative opinion was represented by Muhammad Rasid Rida (1865-1935), who in his compilation, *al-Khilafa wa'l-imama al-uzma* (The Caliphate or the Greatest Imamate), made the case for a restoration. Radical opinion was represented by 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq (1888-1966), who, in his *al-Islam wa usul al-hukum* (Islam and the Foundations of Government), expressed doubts about the need for a caliphate. Realist opinion was expressed by 'Abd al-Raziq Sanhoury's *Le Califat: son evolution vers une société des nations orientales*. He advocated a caliphate that would be subject to periodic election at the *hajj*, with the caliph presiding over a loose grouping of Oriental nations in association with the League of Nations – a general argument similar to Muhammd al-Ghazali's early twenty-first century endorsement of a federation or confederation of Muslim states.

The spectrum thus ranged from those wishing to re-establish a purified religious-political institution, though responding to the distortions of the late Ottoman experience, to those who thought the fusion of religious and political authority was counter-productive or even dangerous, and to accommodationists who saw the best way of adapting to post-war conditions as the creation of an international organisation among sovereign 'Muslim states'. This intellectual diversity merely reflected underlying political differences, despite what was thought to be a common religious sentiment. But, by explicitly placing focus on what the caliphate had meant and the form it should take in the modern world, they each helped to make the post-caliphal community of faith possible. To the question, how should the *umma* be constructed now?, little agreement emerged, with, however, the significant exception: the spiritual unity of the *umma*—an unquestioned given—required some form of *political* expression.

Another current was the Muslim international agitation of the period. Few of the associations and individuals attempting to promote pan-Islam in those years refined their thinking into an ideology of pan-Islamism or tried to carry it over into a serious consideration of organisations and plans of action. The pan-Islamic conventions—Mecca in 1924, Cairo in 1926, Mecca in 1926, Jerusalem in 1931—grappled with these issues to a degree. While they were clearly less than a success, riven by the competing dynastic rivalries of the Middle East (notably Hashimite, Saudi, and Egyptian), they offered nonetheless a rudimentary form of joint action. Government circles in Europe displayed at times an unwarranted anxiety about these meetings, which, no doubt, refracted on elite sentiment within Muslim societies, encouraging pan-Islamic advocates to redouble their efforts. George Antonius, the great defender of Arab nationalism, had an expansive view of what he thought was emerging: ‘I am inclined to believe that for the first time in many years, perhaps in the whole course of history, HMG find themselves faced with the problems of a, if not united, then at any rate uniting, Islam’.

Joining with the Muslim intellectual ferment and the political agitation of the congresses were the influential writings of the Orientalists. These were by and large sympathetic, despite what is often assumed, and largely respected what they saw as the continuities of Islamic thought and history rather than discontinuities. While French observers in the pages of *Revue du monde musulman* and other publications saw the Sufi networks of North and West Africa as potent expressions of an anti-imperial pan-Islam, others tended to look upon the unity of all Muslims as a given and reaffirmed its centrality to Islamic doctrine. For Sir Hamilton Gibb, Islamic solidarity was ambivalent, but the overall force of his argument encouraged the notion of a natural unity to Islam. Although ‘pan-Islamism’, on the one hand, stressed adherence to a broader loyalty, in his view, it had in fact promoted allegiance to the Ottoman caliph; it thus advanced a kind of particularised politics. Yet, on the other hand, this very ambivalence highlighted that ‘Islamic universalism’ was an enduring spiritual and cultural imperative. This universalism was in line, in his words, with ‘the broad and deep currents of a people’s psychology’ and a model of co-operation for the non-Muslim world. With arguments such as these, ‘unity’ was self-consciously made to become part of the essence of Islam. It was now posited as integral and fundamental, divorced largely from the canonical articulation of concepts like *khilafa*, *dar al-islam* (the juridical realm of Muslims), and *dhimma* (non-Muslim subjects). Indeed, the scholarly discussions were remarkably thin on these topics.

In addition, the caliphate was presented as at heart a political institution, connected to the law and ‘temporal power and sovereignty’. C. A. Nallino in the late 1910s and 1920s with his writings on ‘panislamismo’ and T.W. Arnold in his magisterial lectures at the University of London, published in 1924 as *The Caliphate*, had helped to suggest—echoed by ‘Abd al-Raziq—that, given the functional division of religion and politics in Islamic history, the caliphate was a temporal institution. It had always been such an institution, lacking a strong theoretical basis, bound by history and subject to evolution. The implication was clear: if the institution of the caliphate was temporal and political, it was not permanent and was replaceable. It was but a short step to conclude that what Gibb called a ‘spiritual Caliphate’ embodying the ‘religious conscience of the people as a whole’ could become the functional replacement for the caliphate; this, in effect, was pan-Islam.

Although Arnold, writing as the institution of the caliphate disappeared, argued that hope could still be invested in its reconstitution, his larger conclusion points to this broad religious consciousness or what we may call pan-Islamic sentiment:

> A growing number of Muhammadans, now more fully acquainted with modern conditions and more in touch with the aims and ideals of the present day, still cling to the faith of their childhood and the associations that have become dear to them from the Muslim atmosphere in which they grew up. These men likewise cherish an ideal of some form of political and social organisation in which self-realization may become possible for them in some system of civilization that is Muslim in character and expression… Even when the dogmas of their faith have little hold upon them, they are still attracted by the glamour of a distinctively Muslim culture and long to break the chains of an alien civilization.

The conclusion was soon reached that there was no realistic possibility of the caliphate’s reinstatement, nor was there a *need* any longer to re-establish it. *Khilafa* gave way to an idea of ‘unity’ (*ittihad-i Islam, al-wahda al-islamiyya*).

By mid-twentieth century, then, several broad themes emerged. First, a sense that something had gone wrong — symbolised by the abolition of the caliphate — was all pervasive, but ultimately incapable of fostering united goals or action. The congresses of the inter-war period were grounded in the belief that the vastness of the Muslim world constituted its natural strength. In their numbers and in their geographic dispersal, Muslims represented a potentially formidable force. Yet this was clearly its failing as well. A sense of subjugation to the West may have been one binding force, yet the political conditions under which Muslims lived varied widely. The dimensions of British, French, Russian, and Dutch rule were very different, and it mattered whether Muslims were subjected directly to foreign rule or lived under informal imperial arrangements. The calculations made separately by Muslims in different circumstances ruled out a simple consensus.

Second, despite the obvious political differences and competing leadership, stirrings of what we now call translocal networks were enhanced and encouraged. Views were exchanged, issues aired, individuals and cultures encountered. Word of events in distant Muslim lands had often reached other Muslim centres through non-Muslim media, censored publications, and rumour. With the international congresses there were more opportunities to forge unmediated and personal linkages.

Third, the symbol of 'unity' was concretised in the idea of pan-Islam, in large part because of the constructions of both Muslim and Orientalist intellectuals. It was a working idea, partial and vague, but, even so, soon few spoke of the essential necessity of the *caliphate* as an institution. No longer present, was it ever necessary? The caliphate's political mission may have passed, but the idea of *Islam*'s political mission had not. The spiritual unity of Muslims was not in question, it must be emphasised; all readily accepted this in line with Qur'anic references to *umma wahida* (one community; e.g., 5:48/53, 16:93/95). But, if the caliphate had been abolished and if Muslims indisputably constitute one religious community, then the political unity of Muslims itself became now, to many, an element of faith regardless of whether the caliph was present or not. Ahmed Ibrahim Abushouk makes this case forcefully in the first article of the first issue of the *International Journal of Muslim Unity*, produced by the International Islamic University in Malaysia. He paints a picture that has become standard, but, as I have tried to argue, is actually modern. This now-conventional view holds that the unity of the *umma* has existed from the time of the Prophet, it is spiritual but also inherently political, and it is not simply synonymous with the caliphate.

Fourth, institutionalised Islamic universalism did not inevitably result, however, from these connections and new consciousness. Whatever broad awareness was created, it competed with the hesitant but discernible emergence of one-state nationalism (*wataniyya*) in a number of Muslim societies or, at least, the consolidation of dynastic rule and regimes. Individual claims, however obviously promoted by self-interested, would-be caliphs—whether Sharif Husayn of the Hijaz, King Fu'ad of Egypt or the Saudi ʻAbd al-ʻAziz Ibn Saʻud—were legitimised by broader notions of solidarity. Particularistic identities were validated, despite the logic of pan-Islamic unity, precisely because they were in part expressed in the universalist language of Islam. Each sought to consolidate his rule by appealing to a larger mission and by encouraging a political identity that intersected with the wider Islamic one. If pan-Islam had been essentialised, then it was also a tool used to legitimise oneself and to devalue competitors.

Reclaiming the *umma*

As we have seen, the imagining of pan-Islam occurred over time, but was largely a phenomenon of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In the second half of the twentieth century national elites invoked pan-Islam for everything other than pan-Islamic purposes. With one eye on their domestic publics and the other on rival states, they sought to serve as Islamic patrons, and the rivalry among Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Pakistan was illustrative of this. Counter-elites, including Islamist movements like the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and the Front Islamique du Salut (FIS) largely did the same, seeking not so much to restore the caliphate as to establish themselves in power within familiar political forms. The ability of Muslims to live within national frontiers in the modern world and, at the same time, the presence of Islamic concerns in both domestic and foreign policy suggest that the vast majority of Muslims have been seeking, at most, to create 'Muslim' states, not to supplant the nation-state system. Hence, the prevalence of debates, in some quarters unnuanced ones, over how to Islamise state, society, and economics.

Yet this, of course, is only part of the story. Although Islam has always had a ‘global’ dimension, there is something distinctive about the present period: The degree and intensity of interconnectedness — its very comprehensiveness — brings us into relatively unchartered waters. The paramount position of Mecca in Islam – unparalleled in theology — is qualified in fact by the pull of such other centres as Karbala and Qum (for the Shi‘a), Cairo (for the Sunnis), Touba in Senegal (for Mourid Sufis), and, not least, London and Paris (for the large number of European Muslims and Muslim visitors). For the Tablighi Jama‘at, originally a South Asian movement but now one with a near-universal reach, Dewsbury in Britain, where large numbers congregate every year, is just as important as the Nizamuddin mosque and educational complex in India. Moreover, the experience of life and work in ostensible “peripheral” societies such as Belgium or Canada has helped to reshape Tablighi practice, leading, for instance, to the movement's adoption of crèches and a more assertive role for women members.

Some observers have argued that ‘horizontal transnationalism’ characterises the present period, and may be said to have growing political significance in several ways. One rather staid and conservative trend is that intergovernmental organisations have developed by the agreement of existing Muslim states. The most important of these are the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Islamic Development Bank. But the OIC, which some regard as the most concrete contemporary institutionalisation of pan-Islam, is in practice an inter-state organisation based on the principles of ‘respect [for] the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of each member state’ and of ‘abstention from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity, national unity or political independence of any member states’

More interesting in the long run, perhaps, is the range of non-state actors that has also emerged. Sufi movements exemplify non-governmental organizations that have had far reaching effects. Orders such as the Tijaniyya and Qadiriyya have had extensive links throughout North and sub-Saharan Africa and have often wielded significant political influence. Colonial intelligence officers overstated the organisation of these orders as monolithic conspiracies, but the translocal linkages they have forged have created important channels of communication across frontiers. Often new political communities have resulted. By crossing existing ethnic and social identities, for example, the Khatmiyya helped to inspire the Sudanese national movement around the Mahdi.

A notable feature of non-state movements is their vigorous publication activity. Through the standardisation of language and the formal presentation of issues of concern to believers worldwide, these publications are helping to inspire a new consciousness among Muslims that does not neatly overlap with state, or even other communal, borders. To give one familiar example, today virtually every Muslim journal has a section devoted to the problems and prospects of Muslim minority communities throughout the world. The dilemmas of Muslim minorities in the West are of special concern. But the debates that ensue among the minority communities themselves over such issues as political and specifically electoral participation, the role of women, and the limits of dissent, are far from self-contained and have often captured the attention of Muslim majority communities.

In reality, *despite* these trends, it must be said that ambivalence is embedded in Muslim self-understandings of Muslim solidarity. On the one hand, as we have seen, the political unity of all Muslims acquires the force of dogma in some circles, even though it is not clear how to attain or organise it. On the other hand, the political mission of Islam – at least for most of the twentieth century – was best represented in the national enterprise, even though the national guardians routinely invoked wider standards of legitimacy.

Yet, as the pan-Islamic dimension appeared to recede, some ‘radicals’, if you will, have sought to fill the void. They seek, in their view, to reclaim the *umma* from the nation-state and dynastic regimes. They seek to reconstruct modern Islam along the lines of an alternative interpretation, one which places the community of faith above individual states and governments. What they lack in coherence they make up in fervour. Examples are obvious: Hizb al-Tahrir al-Islami (the Islamic Liberation Party), the Muhajirun (an offshoot of the Hizb al-Tahrir in Britain), Usama Bin Ladin and Ayman al-Zawahiri (leaders of al-Qa‘ida). In effect, pan-Islam went underground, re-emerged spectacularly, and, in one virulent form, attacks the status quo in the name of a ‘tradition’ that has only relatively recently appeared.

Bin Ladin’s statement of 7 October 2001 dated the current troubles of the Muslim world to eighty years before. Although he did not directly say what the benchmark was, it likely refers to the demise of the caliphate in 1924. This interpretation is consistent with general Islamist accounts that link European, specifically British, intervention with local secularising regimes — here Atatürk — to explain the collapse of Muslim unity. Today it is the American presence in the Middle East and elsewhere that is particularly harmful because it is both economic and ideological; its attempt to attain market domination is dependent on the curtailing of Islam to a kind of safe, conservative, and largely privatised Islam such as the ruling elites of the Muslim world practise.

The juridical bifurcation of the world into Islamic and non-Islamic realms has gained new currency as purportedly Muslim states fall into the non-Islamic category. In the medieval period, ‘Abbasid jurists had established a clear frontier between the land of unbelievers (*dar al-harb*) and the land of believers (*dar al-islam*); the former was the realm of war and the latter of peace. This distinction grew fuzzy over time, and virtually disappeared as the state system crystallised in the Muslim world. But this manner of thinking has reappeared, predictably directed against Western enemies but also directed against nominally Muslim regimes. States like Saudi Arabia or Pakistan may proclaim themselves to be Islamic, but they are actually ‘allies of Satan’ (*a‘wan al-shaytan*). The old Muhajirun went so far as to say that because no regimes could be considered Islamic today, there is no such thing as *dar al-islam*. Some medieval scholars had argued that there was an intermediary realm of lands in a truce with the Islamic world (*dar al-sulh*). This concept underpins Bin Ladin’s offer of a cessation of hostilities to European states in April 2004, and one suspects that this is the normative context in which, in his intervention prior to the American election of November 2004 and wanting to counter President Bush’s argument that al-Qa‘ida hates Western freedoms, he singled out Sweden as an example of a freedom-loving state that did not merit attack.

But not all who invoke traditional frameworks of international analysis are committed to the path of violence. To the contrary, a number of intellectuals, contrsoversially among them the former Egyptian Muslim Brother Yusuf al-Qaradawi, now in Qatar and popular on al-Jazeera television, and Taha Jabir al-Alwani, an Iraqi who moved to the United States in the mid-1980s, have been concerned with the situation of Muslims living outside the majority Muslim world. *Fiqh* or jurisprudence has covered Muslims in a personal capacity but has always had a territorial dimension built into it as well. The development of a permanent Muslim minority presence in Western and other societies has seemed to call for clearer guidance on modern conditions, such as military service, participation in elections, and contracting home mortgages. In various rulings and opinions, this jurisprudence of the minorities (*fiqh al-aqalliyat*) effectively makes the division between majority and minority the critical demarcation of the modern world. Al-Qaradawi, for instance, gave contradictory *fatwa*s concerning the obligation of Muslim soldiers in the war against the Taliban in Afghanistan, but the initial ruling largely rested on the national obligations of American Muslims in the American military.[i] The rationale for this kind of judgement involves an acceptance, at times explicit, at others tacit, that Western societies are tantamount to *dar al-islam* if they allow Muslims to practise their faith openly and without interference.

The pan-Islamic dimension is an important part of the logic of today's evolving jurisprudence since, it is argued, minority Muslims, no matter where they reside, are still members of the larger *umma* and have obligations as members of that community. But they owe, and are clearly expected to give, obedience to the laws of the land in which they reside, unless, naturally, those contravene God's law. The redrawing of the internal borders, to the extent that it has in fact occurred, has wider implications.

In an important way, these concerns are helping to subvert the internal/external bifurcation of conventional international relations thinking: on one level, it is recognised that Muslims are increasingly living in an 'external', predominantly non-Muslim domain. Yet, on another level, the defence of and care for these same Muslims are regarded as an 'internal' Muslim prerogative—that is, a matter for the *umma*, no matter how elusive the notion may seem. The territorial and the universal, ‘traditional’ frameworks and new ones, thus meet, in a hybrid way, on the common ground of religious obligation and political expectation. Be that as it may, guidance as to how to negotiate between these levels of obligation is far from final and is best viewed as a work in progress.

Differentiation

There is one further dimension to this story, however. Summarising complex debates, we know that the early expectations of transnational theories have not come to fruition. One expectation centred on the undermining of the state. Whilst this point is not developed here, it is clear that the subverting of the state has not happened even though alternative institutional ideas have emerged. Another expectation was that translocal links would encourage new communities or establish new identities. As has been suggested, there is increasingly something to this aspect: largely due to the crises of failed regimes, if not failed states, and to the power of globalised communications media both to familiarise and to objectify, the *umma* has gained some social weight as an alternative form of affiliation. This accounts, in part, for the widespread Muslim discontent over the perceived injustices of Palestine, Kashmir, and Chechnya among others. It perhaps also accounts for the current exaggerated fear of Islamist networks — an echo of nineteenth century European anxiety over pan-Islamic anti-colonialism.

To the extent that a translocal, pan-Islamic, identity is emerging, it has been valorised not only by understanding what Islam is not, but also by self-understanding—tacit, now increasingly explicit, notions of how Muslims view themselves. We have already seen this in the self-consciousness of ‘minority’ Islam. It must also be seen in an increasing concretisation of what can only be called sectarianism. While confessional animosity was vehemently expressed in earlier periods, such as Ibn Jawzi’s anti Shi‘i and anti-Sufi tract, *Talbis Iblis* (The Devil’s Deception), in the twelfth century, one immediately thinks more recently of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s fetid diatribe against the Shi‘a of Iraq. But more than this has occurred.

In a very real way, the entire thrust of modern Islamic political thought has been trans-sectarian, preferring attractively vague notions like *shura* (consultation), *ijma`* (consensus) and *al-dawla al-islamiyya* (Islamic state) to the more contentious debates over precise authority of religious leaders or shrine-centred ritual. In Persia in the eighteenth century, Nader Shah famously tried to induce the Ottoman Sultan to recognise Twelver Shiʻism as the fifth orthodox school of law and, in 1743, convened a grand conference of religious officials to reconcile the two major sects. The Egyptian Mahmud Shaltut, Shaykh al-Azhar in the Nasserist period, issued a *fatwa* in 1959 that authorised Shiʻi instruction at al-Azhar for the first time in 900 years and directly referred with approval to Shiʻi legal ideas. He described Islam as the 'religion of unity' (*al-islam din al-wahda*). A new institution and journal (*Risalat al-islam*) was created to promote convergence of legal thought—*taqrib al-madhahib*—and for a while the Islamic revolutionary state of Iran produced a journal, *Risalat al-taqrib*, to promote the same goal.

What is more, it is clear that self-professed reformers have long preferred an eclecticism (*takhayyur*) and synthesis (*talfiq*) to strict adherence to distinctive schools of thought. This was the impulse behind the law reforms of the early to mid-twentieth century, but also currently of the popular website, 'Islamonline'. The arguments of Shaykh Qaradawi—in print, on al-Jazeera, or on Islamonline—are madhhab-lite, speaking of general principles and common concerns, rather than making specific reference to the principles of the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafiʻi or Hanbali schools of law (*madhhab*s) and citing few of the classical works of jurisprudence. The consequence of such a modern approach is subject to debate, however. Wael Hallaq has argued that, over time, the strategy has been 'arbitrary' and driven by the demands of political centralization and modernisation, in the process leading to the 'demise of the *shariʻa*'. Others have argued that it meshes with the modern emphasis on Muslim commonality and thereby creates a virtual pan-Islam at the same time as it establishes pan-Islamic authority—in the words of Peter Mandaville, a 'virtual caliphate'.

While many jurists continue to promote synthesis in the hope of greater harmony, another distinctive feature of the modern landscape is an accentuation of difference: the pronouncing of *takfir* (excommunication) on fellow Muslims, for example, but also the self- and cross-identification of Muslims as Salafis, Shiʻa, Wahhabis, Shafiʻis, Mourides, Nursis, and the many variations on these identities. Salafi tracts, purportedly aimed at *muʻamalat*, the practice of the faith, often denounce

Shi‘i deviations in such emotive terms that the sense of the *umma* seems to vanish into the ether.

The questioning of synthetic or eclectic reasoning in modern Islam does not have to be radical or confrontational, however. Indeed, there are many Muslim intellectuals who are critical of this approach, fearing that the loss of strict methodology associated with a distinct school of interpretation creates aimlessness at best, Mawdudian and Qutbian politicisation at worst. A distinguished scholar of Islam, Hamid Algar, has argued, for example, that the Wahhabis, by their beliefs and practices, are outside Sunni Islam. According to him, his intention in saying so is not polemical, but to set the historical record straight and to maintain intellectual integrity: ‘That Wahhabis are now counted as Sunni is one indication that the term “Sunni” has come to acquire an extraordinarily loose meaning…; it fact, [in this usage] it signifies little more than “non-Shi‘i”.’

Just as many are promoting a kind of generic Islam and undifferentiated notions of unity, sectarian and theological differences have also hardened. This may reflect the general interaction between globalisation and localisation or the natural tension between unity and diversity. But the competing ideas and identities that have historically existed across and within Muslim societies and that are being reified anew today complicate the pan-Islamic project. To the extent that the *umma* is being imagined, which it doubtless is to some extent, it may also be a fractured imagination.

Conclusion

Awareness of these differences undermines simple ideas of universal community and the centrality of doctrine, but it also reminds us of the deep structures that underpin Muslim societies. There are lines of division among Muslims, now seen mainly but not only in nation-state terms; there are also mobile communities that escape easy categorisation, now especially seen in Muslims of the West who undermine a strict divide between an Islamic ‘here’ and a non-Islamic ‘there’. Muslim transnational networks are well-financed organised additions to the scene, but they could not exist without underlying strata of affiliation and support, however unformulated and inarticulate they may at times be. And, it must be acknowledged, there is also a more sharply delineated sense of inclusion and exclusion among some Muslims — one that aspires to redraw the internal borders of Islam at least as urgently as reconfiguring the balance of power between Muslims and non-Muslims. Many of these speak in the name of a fictive, capital E ‘Islamic Empire’; to invoke Homi Bhahba, these radical Islamists deploy the ‘language of archaic belonging’.

Pan-Islam has always been the source of outside anxiety. And, to the extent that the notion of the *umma* is becoming formalised, it may well sharpen antagonism towards Islam and perhaps, in turn, stimulate, pronounced Muslim criticisms of Western policy. But the story which is unfolding is not about Islam versus the West. The new story, if you will, is different, especially if, unlike the past, pan-Islamic identity reaches beyond the elite level. This consciousness may be deeper and broader now, and to the extent that fault-lines exist, they are certainly not civilisational, nor even dynastic, and perhaps not even national or starkly ethnic as in the past. In the end, the construction of the *umma* will continue to depend, not so much on what the non-Muslim world or a grand monolith such as ‘Western civilisation’ wants. It will largely depend, rather, on the possibilities — and indeed the limits — of the conversation within Muslim societies.

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